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ABSTRACT

A value conflict arises when one value can only be realized at the expense of another value. This digest describes the scope of career value conflict, its developmental significance, and some conflict resolution strategies. Several studies have shown that some career values are particularly prone to conflict, such as salary, freedom in the job, security, leisure, and challenge. But conflicts can contribute to an individual's development since they help the person understand which values are the most important. Also, conflict directs attention and motivates individuals toward a solution. It is suggested that such conflicts can be met with seven responses: correcting judgments, in which judgments which are faulty or too extreme are reexamined; expanding options, where further responses to the crisis are sought; examining influences, where the person traces the basis for a value and tries to determine its importance; reconceptualization, in which the person refines, extends, and elaborates meanings; personal change and development, where the individual is encouraged to become more capable of undertaking challenges; seeking complementarity, which involves reconciling two seemingly opposed values; and setting priorities, in which values are ranked according to their importance. Resolving conflicts is important since opposing values can have strong developmental implications. (RJM)

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by Larry Cochran

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Conflict In Career Decisions

Larry Cochran

Overview

A value conflict arises when one value can only be realized at the expense of another value. For example, an artist might believe that commercial art provides security, but little creativity. By contrast, independent artists lack security, yet enjoy opportunities for creativity. Across the artist's range of options, realizing one value seems to require foregoing another value. In stronger cases of conflict, a person's whole set of values can be divided into groups that clash with one another. In weaker cases, conflict might be limited to a few values. This digest describes the scope of career value conflict, its developmental significance, and some strategies of conflict resolution.

Scope of Conflict

In three studies of conflict in career values, Cochran (1977, 1983, 1986) found that approximately one of every three significant relations among values was conflicting. In one study, 84 senior high students rated 10 personally selected options on 10 common values (Cochran, 1986). For every pair of values, at least one student demonstrated a conflict. Values that were particularly prone to conflict included salary, freedom in job, security, leisure time, and challenge. For example, the promise of higher salary might tempt persons to sacrifice their free time or fear of insecurity might frighten persons away from challenges. The diversity of conflict was striking.

Even without evidence from the above studies, it seems that conflict within decision making is common. Conflict prompts a decision. If an option existed that met all of one's values, a decision would be unnecessary. Whatever option is examined, there are apt to be gains and losses, and it is this struggle between what to realize and what to neglect that calls for a decision.

Developmental Significance of Conflict

Individuals typically embrace career values as means or vehicles of value, not values in themselves. For example, salary may forward other values (intangible constituents of the good life), but it has no value in itself. The immediate implication is that conflicts between career values cannot be adequately resolved or understood in themselves. Rather, career values are concrete ways to pose fundamental value issues of a person's vision of a good life. For example, can one best attain a good life by increasing one's capability of acquiring goods and services (salary), by avoiding calamities (security), or by becoming a better person (cultivation of talent)? Now, when one career value conflicts with another, fundamental questions arise with some urgency. Is it better, for example, to have the goods most worth having or to become the kind of person most worth being (Feinberg, 1970)? Conflict provides a natural entrance to fundamental questions and meanings concerning a person's implicit vision of life, providing an exploratory depth that might help persons establish stronger priorities and make wiser adjustments.

While there are many reasons for encouraging greater depth in career counseling (e.g., preparation for coping with conflict and compromise), two reasons furnish immediate significance. First, studies of midlife career change (Osherson, 1980) indicate the presence of intense and unresolved conflicts from earlier decisions, conflicts so significant that one can speak of a lost self. One value or set of values is realized at the expense of a core value or set of values, a loss that can eventually lead to crisis. Second, as Taylor (1977) has argued, a person's identity is defined by fundamental evaluations of what ideals should prevail in life. Becoming a person requires a capacity to articulate one's position with the depth necessary to determine compatible courses of action. In this sense, resolving conflict helps one become a stronger agent in shaping a desired life.

Solving Career Value Conflicts

Conflict directs attention and motivates individuals toward a solution. According to Janis and Mann (1977), if the conflict is significant, solvable, and if there is time, a person is apt to be motivated (e.g., vigilant) to explore options, gather information, weigh values, and strive for a solution. Below are seven strategies that counselors might consider as they counsel clients. The first four strategies emphasize dissolving conflict (making it disperse) while the last three strategies emphasize resolving conflict (settling it by resolution).

Correcting Judgments

Conflict is based upon judgments of options. Often, these judgments are faulty or too extreme. In these cases, conflict might be dissolved if misjudgments are corrected. For example, the artist who is noted in the introduction might find that commercial art allows more creativity than originally thought. Corrections of judgments typically arise through further exploration of options, gathering information, and gaining experience. Corrections might also occur through the consideration of temporal changes in occupations. Beginning commercial artists might work largely under the direction of others, but over time, they may become responsible for creative projects. By suspending static judgments of occupations and by considering how occupations

change over time, conflict can sometimes be realistically dissolved and converted into anticipated challenges (e.g., to perform well enough to earn more responsibility).

Expanding Options

Ordinarily, a conflict is limited to a range of options. For example, creativity and security might conflict with one another, but only within a particular set of options. By searching more broadly, a person might discover options accompanied by little or no value conflict. One should also consider how a value might be satisfied in other outlets, such as recreational pursuits, volunteer work, or civic participation.

Examining Influences

A variety of transient and extraneous influences can make a particular value unjustifiably prominent. A peer group, family, television, or a romantic relationship, can render a salient value, upon closer examination, as not pronounced at all. In these cases, it is important to trace the basis for a value and try to determine whether it will be an enduring desire or a momentary urgency.

Reconceptualization

Values might clash because they have been conceived narrowly, vaguely, or in a distorted manner. In these cases, values can be conceived more broadly, more sharply, or with more balance. By helping clients to refine, extend, and elaborate meanings, conflict due to faulty conception can often be reframed and minimized. Also, a more adequate set of indicators (i.e., how one could determine if an option had the quality desired) can be identified.

Personal Change and Development

Consider a conflict between confidence and challenge. The person feeling confident in jobs that lacking challenge, might lack confidence in challenging jobs. In a case such as this, conflict could be dissolved if the person became more capable of undertaking challenges without excessive discomfort. Numerous difficulties (lack of esteem, shyness, etc.) call for personal development in order to realize other values (see discussion of meta-cognitions in Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 1991).

Seeking Complementarity

As ends in themselves, two values might be at odds. However, if considered as means to fulfill one's vision of a good life, incompatible values can sometimes be made complementary. For example, salary and time-off might conflict with one another, but each might also be important in forwarding a common end such as the quality of family life. By seeing how each value complements the other as means toward a common end, a conflict is placed in perspective. A client can consider each value in preparation for evaluating options and making wise compromises. Common ends can be explored by asking clients why they prefer, for instance, higher salary.

Setting Priorities

Perhaps the most natural way to resolve conflict is to determine which value is most important. Suppose a client was faced with a choice between a job that was interesting but low in salary, and a job that was uninteresting but high in salary. Such a conflict might be resolved by whether or not salary was more important than interest. Sometimes, a priority is obvious. At other times, a person must decide which value should prevail in an envisioned course of life. The peculiarity of this decision is that a client does not decide between options, but between values, weighing their relative advantages and disadvantages for the future. Occasionally, clients can transcend a conflict by considering their priorities. For example, a client might find that the conflicting values are relatively unimportant when they are compared to other core values.

Conclusion

The techniques chosen in career counseling largely determine the contents of awareness. Some contents are apt to become visible while others remain invisible. Unfortunately, traditional techniques of career counseling tend to make value conflict invisible. For example, conflict is not apparent in interpreting an interest test or a test of work values. Conflict can, however, be made apparent through a career grid (Cochran, 1983) and through some forms of discussion. In short, recognizing and dealing with conflict requires a change in career counseling practice. The immediate question, then, is whether or not it would be worthwhile to make value conflict a part of career counseling.

In cases where conflict can be dissolved, it need not become a focus of attention: future experiences might stimulate the necessary corrections. However, if strategies are constructive (e.g., there is nothing wrong with searching for better options), conflict in such cases need not hamper counseling with irrelevant and negative content. In cases where conflict must be resolved, it seems necessary that conflict be recognized, understood, and dealt with in some way. Resolving conflict is crucial because the clashing values have such strong developmental implications.

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